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THE
THIEF AND THE CROSS.

A SERMON

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THE CROSS AND THE SWASTIKA

A HISTORY

OF THE SWASTIKA SYMBOL

BY

WILLIAM STUBBS

THE SWASTIKA SYMBOL

IN THE

RECENT PAST

AND ITS

THE THIEF AND THE CROSS.

LUKE XXIII., vs. 42, 43, 44.

IN this chapter we have an account of one of the most wonderful events that ever came to pass on this earth ; an event that was purposed in the past eternity—an event that was looked for in this world since the fall—an event that was accomplished in the fullness of time, and that will be remembered throughout the endless ages of the eternity that is to come ; we mean the death of Christ.

In close connection with this death, we have in the words of our text, that which we may call one of the most triumphant acts of our Lord's earthly sojourn. For, just as the rays of the setting sun exceed in loveliness all its mid-day splendour, so is this dying act of our Lord's, His mercy and His grace, His love and His truth, His divinity and His humility, shine forth with the richest lustre.

In considering the passage before us, we shall, depending on the aid of the Holy Spirit, notice (1), The person who prayed to Christ ; (2) The prayer he offered, and (3) The answer he got.

I. Then he who prayed. Who was he and what was he ? We read that he has a thief ; in other words, a highwayman, a robber, a breaker of the laws of God and of man ; and here

he is now on the verge of the world of spirits—God-condemned, man-condemned and self-condemned. A “thief,” a justly condemned thief; better than this could not be said of him now—nay, better than this he ventured not to think or say of himself. Harken to his words, “we indeed justly for we receive the due rewards of our deeds.” Oh my brethren! what a position to occupy on the brink of eternity! When he looked to the past he saw nothing but his own evil deeds, setting themselves in fearful array against him; and when he peers into the future into which he is soon to be launched, he sees nothing for him but the blackness of darkness forever and ever. If he receives such just punishment in this life at the hands of men, what can he expect in yonder world when the Judge of all the earth shall deal justly? How fearful a thing must it be to fall into the hands of the living God! But though this picture is so dark, so very dark; yet, blessed be God, it has a bright side; for he who was nailed to yonder cross, a child of Satan, and an heir of eternal destruction, before his dead body was taken down to the earth, his soul was with Christ in paradise. O wonderful divine grace! a condemned sinner on the brink of eternity, in one day—yes, during the space of a few hours, justified, sanctified, and glorified. In one day in three kingdoms; we find him in the kingdom of nature, we see him a forgiven sinner in the kingdom of grace, and we leave him with Christ in the kingdom of glory. Ere the sun of that day did set behind yon western hills—he, that malefactor, saved by grace, was with Jesus where the sun of eternity never sets. It is not revealed to us what means the Spirit of God used for bringing about this man’s conversion, although there are several things to be noticed in this chapter that might be used as a means; for instance, the Spirit might use as an instrument for this end Christ’s demeanour: He was mocked, He was smitten, He was spat upon, He was scourged and hardly dealt with in every conceivable way, yet He maintains

through it all a divine calm; He is quiet and meek and gentle; "He openeth not His mouth."

Or the Spirit might employ Christ's words to the daughters of Jerusalem: "Weep not for me, but weep for yourselves and your children." Who is this that can in the midst of such deep suffering forget Himself and manifest such care and sympathy for a few weeping women? And if He can manifest such for them, may He not be ready to extend to me, who is to suffer with Him, something of the same? But further, the Spirit might use as a means for this man's conversion the prayer Jesus offered up at Calvary: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." The manner and the matter of the prayer were quite sufficient to impress the malefactor, and call forth his whole attention and his whole soul to that victim (Jesus) that was hanging by his side. "Father," nay more, "Father forgive them," yes "forgive them for they know not what they do." But whatever means the Spirit of God used, we are sure of this—that the malefactor in question underwent a great, and a gracious, and a glorious change.

In support of this let us adduce a few important considerations. First, this man was convinced of sin: "in the same condemnation;" said he, "and we indeed justly, for we receive the due rewards of our deeds." He had thought little about it, and it had concerned him not much: Ah! but how different now! He sees sin in its true light; he feels it to be that which has ruined his soul, his body, and his character, and which is now bringing him down to eternal destruction. With how many, brethren has this been the case! They spent perhaps the whole of life without considering the evil of sin or the end to which it was bringing them; it was but a trifling thing for them to sin; but, alas! when death came—when the closing moments of life came without the chief end of life attained, how fearful was it to face the grave, the judgment seat, and eternity! Let us seek

the convincing power of the spirit ; so that we, too, may be led, like this dying malefactor, to Him who come to seek and save the lost.

Secondly, there is another consideration in support of the gracious change under which this man passed ; namely, his acknowledgment of the justice of his punishment. " We indeed justly ;" though racked in extreme pain—though exposed to the utmost shame—though bleeding at every pore, yet he thought it nothing but just, " We indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds." With the Psalmist he could say,

" Gainst Thee, Thee only, have I sinned,
In Thy sight done this ill,
That when Thou speak'st Thou may'st be just,
And clear in judging still."

Thirdly, notice this man's faith. The whole nation looked upon Christ as a traitor and deceiver, and hence, they put him to death. His own disciples and friends, filled with fear and apprehension, have forsaken their master, and are scattered abroad ; but this man believes in Jesus as the Messiah that was to come—the Saviour of lost sinners. He believes in Christ as the God-man. When he speaks of Him he says, " this man," and when he prays to Him, he says " Lord ;" true God and real man. He believes in Him also as the King—the King of Zion. " When," said he, " Thou comest to Thy Kingdom." He knew that Jesus had a kingdom beyond this world, beyond death and the grave. As sure was he of this as, although like Stephen, he had seen the heavens opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Further, this malefactor believes in this dying Messiah, as the Saviour who was both able and willing to save to the very uttermost ; the Saviour who was able and willing to save such a low, miserable, guilty, hell-deserving wretch as he was ; able to save me—yes, willing to save me : and then he exclaims, " Lord remember me when Thou comest to Thy Kingdom."

Remember me in such a way as that Thou wilt save me from the awful misery that is now staring me in the face, and in such a way as that I will find a place in Thy favour and in Thy Kingdom. It is sweet to die with Thee ; but Lord how surpassing sweet would it be to live with Thee in Thy Kingdom. Here we see the fruits of true repentance ; a man convinced of sin—acknowledging the justice of the punishment of sin—a man turning with sorrow and hatred from sin and casting himself on Jesus the Saviour.

Fourthly, another point that bears testimony to the gracious change through which this man passed, we find in the testimony he bears to Christ's innocence. "This man has done nothing amiss." Christ is now condemned as a traitor. Hell and earth are enraged against Him. The chief priests and the scribes, the pharisees and the solders mock Him ; the great crowd cry out against Him ; they wag the head saying, "if Thou be the King of the Jews save Thyself." Jesus Himself is quite silent ; and who is there to speak one word in His behalf ? John, the loved disciple, will not ; Peter the brave warrior has laid down his arms and he too is silent. Who is there that will fearlessly lift up his voice in behalf of the Messiah's innocence ? It is none else than that malefactor—that miserable wretch saved by grace—"this man has done nothing amiss." Against hell and earth ; against chief priests and scribes, rulers and soldiers, and an enraged mob, the dying thief bears this definite, this decided, this glorious testimony. Such then, is the view that believing faith will always take of the dying Saviour. The Just One suffering for the unjust, the innocent for the guilty.

Again, fifthly, he reproves and rebukes sin. The other malefactor joins with the crowd in deriding Christ. He manifests levity of spirit, hardness of heart, and bitter enmity against Christ. But the penitent thief reproves him saying, "Dost thou not fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation ?" "And we indeed justly." Fain would he see him,

with whom probably he sinned, was condemned, and with whom he was now dying, turn with him to the same and one Saviour of sinners.

"Reprove, rebuke, exhort," writes the Apostle, and so ought all Christians. Their religion ought to be practical; their daily walk through life and their conversation ought to bear testimony against sin, as sure as it ought to bear testimony in behalf of Jesus Christ the Saviour.

But sixthly, and lastly, this man prayed. This was the token God Himself gave of Saul's conversion. He said unto Ananias, "Arise and go into the street which is called Straight and enquire in the house of Judas for one, Saul of Tarsus; for behold he prayeth." As where natural life is, there is breath, so, where the spiritual life of God is in the soul, there is prayer. Prayer is the Christians vital breath. Thus then, putting all these points together, along with Christ's answer to the prayer offered, we have the strongest and clearest evidence that this penitent thief passed from a state of sin to a state of grace and from a state of grace to a state of glory.

Now my friends, let me ask you, is your christianity—is your profession of religion supported by such evidences as these? Do you hate sin? Do you cleave to Christ? Do you pray to heaven?

II. In the second place notice the prayer offered by this penitent thief. It is, "Lord remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom." This is a short but comprehensive prayer. It is a prayer without a single trace of doubt, from beginning to end. It is the prayer of faith and it is the prayer of faith heard and answered. We notice in the first place that the prayer is not for any worldly blessing. Oh! how wonderful that the man who had hitherto spent his life in hoarding the world together. At all hazards does not now offer even one petition for any earthly blessing. What is the world to him now? What is the whole world to him? For

what shall it profit a man though he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Truly it is in the light of a dying hour—in the light of a judgment seat and of a coming eternity, that we can properly estimate the worth and value of all things temporal and earthly.

Observe in the second place, this man does not even pray to be delivered from the shame to which he was exposed or from the pain he was enduring. His bodily sufferings were no doubt great, but there is not a single word in his prayer concerning them; and why? just because the pain arising from a consciousness of guilt was far greater. The pangs of a guilty conscience far exceeded the pain of his tortured body. Its iron grasp in which he was held prisoner; its words of fire that pierced his soul to the very core, brought from his lips the prayer in our text. Ah! what an awful thing must it be to go to meet death and eternity with a guilty conscience—the worm that will never die—that will never cease to give unutterable pain to its victims!

In the third place we notice the true modesty as well as the faith manifested in this prayer. All that he asks is a place in his Lord's memory. How different from the two who came with the request that one of them might sit on Christ's right hand and the other on his left hand in His kingdom; for all that the poor malefactor asks is a place in the Lord's memory. "Remember me." He knew that it would be well with him if he got but a place in Christ's memory. If Jesus would but think of him it must fare well with him at last. Again he leaves his case wholly at the disposal of the sovereign will of his Lord. He does not say remember me now—remember me to-day; no but remember me "when." He was willing to be forgotten in his sufferings, if he got the pledge of being remembered at the time, whenever that time came, that his Lord and his Saviour came to His kingdom.

In the fourth place, we see that all the hopes, the expectations and the desires manifested in this prayer are for eternity.

The penitent one's desire is to have Christ's favour, and that he cannot have apart from the forgiveness of his sins. He prays that his Lord may think favourably of him so that it may be well with him. And you notice, when he got the pledge he sought, we do not read that he opened his mouth again on earth, and likely not till he opened it singing the new song of Moses and the Lamb—not on earth, but in heaven.

III. We will now consider the answer to this prayer. "And Jesus said unto him, to-day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Here we have, first, a prompt and complete answer. There was a necessity for this, because eternity was close at hand and the penitent one required to have all his doubts and fears swept away, so that he might have peace, and rest in hope as to the future. Secondly, we have this answer conveying to the praying malefactor more than he asks. It undoubtedly conveyed to him forgiveness, peace and hope. Methinks I see Jesus turning to him and saying, Yes, thou art a sinner ; a vile unworthy sinner ; yet all thine iniquities I forgive, all my grace I bestow upon thee, and a place I promise thee "to-day," not only in my memory but in my kingdom. The malefactor does not specify any set time ; he says "when" but Jesus answers and says "to-day," not another sun will set, not another day will pass, till thou be with Me in paradise. To-day thou shalt pass from the cross of shame and suffering to yonder paradise of bliss and eternal joy. May we not pause here and ask where then is purgatory ?

But again, the penitent one asks only a place in the Lord's memory. Here again Christ tells him that he will have more, "to-day shalt thou be with me," "with me," yes "with me in paradise." Oh what is this ? Christ passing from yonder cross to the throne with a robber, saved by grace at His side. What is this ? A dying malefactor passing from the shame and the pain of the cross to the joys and the glories of

paradise; passing from praying to Christ on the cross to praising Him on the throne. He was with Jesus on the cross in shame and suffering, but ere the sun of that day did set he was with Jesus amidst the glories of the Father's house; and how loud would he sing "Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood!" "In paradise." Sufficient to say that this is the place where Jesus dwells, where the angels and the redeemed dwell together, where pure and satisfying rest remaineth for the people of God, and where unmingled joy and eternal bliss shall be given them as their portion. Oh! (says one) to be like the malefactor, saved by grace, and with him at last in the paradise above, adoring our one blessed Saviour and singing the songs of His love forever and ever! Friend, raise your cry to the Saviour and keep your eye upon Him and all shall be well.

Now we pass in conclusion to consider a few practical lessons this subject brings before us.

(1.) Notice here the free exercise of the sovereign grace of God. There are two malefactors, the one is taken and saved, the other is left. Again and again we are brought face to face with this doctrine in the Word of God. In Matthew we read: "Then shall two be in the field; the one shall be taken and the other left. Two women shall be grinding at the mill; the one shall be taken and the other left." This doctrine is indeed as solemn as it is true, but let us not forget in connection with it, to settle another question namely, which of the robbers was taken and saved, and which was left and lost? The penitent, praying one, was taken; the rejecting scorner was left. God is sovereign. He is also gracious; and as such, His words to every sinner are, "Turn ye, turn ye for why will ye die." "Look unto Me and be ye saved." "Come unto me and I will give you rest." God lays the duty on our shoulders, and every time we endeavour to make light of it or to dispose of it, we but make stronger the chains that bind us to eternal damnation.

(2.) Learn from this subject that as a man may be very low in sin and yet be saved, so also, a man may be very near Christ and yet be lost. As the one malefactor went up to paradise, snatched from the very brink of hell, the other went down to destruction from the very side of the Saviour.

(3.) We see here that Christ is both able and willing to save to the uttermost. In the midst of His deepest distress, He heard yon penitent wretch cry ; He heard and He saved. If he did so then, how much more will He do so now, being exalted to the right hand of God, a Prince and a Saviour. Now He is not on the cross, but on the throne ; having all authority and power in heaven and in earth in His hands.

Oh fainting, trembling one, fear not ! Behold He liveth ! Seeking one—anxious one—why need you fear ? He is the same Jesus, still full of pity and compassion, and whosoever cometh unto Him, He will in no wise cast out.

(4.) And lastly let us learn from this subject, not to delay the salvation of our souls to a dying hour. Many put this all-important matter aside for the present, and look forward to a sick bed and a dying hour, as a more convenient season. They will do so as did the thief on the cross. But has God promised you a sick bed ? How many of our fellow-creatures are daily hurried into eternity without a moment's warning ? and what then of a sick bed repentance ? And supposing you come to a sick bed ; may not all your faculties be so paralyzed that you will be disabled to utter one cry or groan to heaven ? And above all, remember that the thief on the cross is the only case you have in the Bible of a soul saved at the eleventh hour. And do you ask why have we this case ? I answer that we have this instance to show that while there is life there is hope ; but we have this instance only, to show us and to impress us with the truth that "behold now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation."

" And he said unto Jesus ; Lord remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, verily I say unto thee, to-day thou shalt be with Me in paradise."

Dear fellow-sinners, you are invited to-day and now to be saved by Christ, and to get a full right to all the bliss of the paradise above.

Can you reject the offer ? For why will you die saith the Lord,

Christian friend ; soon it will be yours, like the malefactor, to leave the pain and the shame and the cross behind, and to pass up to be with your Lord in His kingdom. Hope on, and pray on ; for it is only "a moment" and then you shall sing on forever and ever unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood ; and hath made us kings and priests unto God His Father. To Him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen !

